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Nancy Von Rosk

1 In his essay of 1941, "Justice to Edith Wharton," Edmund Wilson declared that Wharton's early novella, "Bunner Sisters" was "undeservedly neglected" (204). More recently, Donna Campbell has remarked that the novella "deserves to be better known," and Hermione Lee writes that this "realist masterpiece of thwarted lives never gained the status it would have had if it had come out as a separate novella like *Ethan Frome*" (180, 161). Lee adds that in "Bunner Sisters," "Wharton's strong strand of compassionate realism—more Dreiser than James—has tended to be undervalued" (184). Indeed, "Bunner Sisters" has had a long history of being overlooked. Rejected twice by Scribner's because of its length and its "being unsuitable to serial publication," it would be twenty-three years before Wharton saw "Bunner Sisters" in print (Lewis, *Letters* 31).[1] As both Wharton's reputation and Wharton scholarship have grown enormously in recent years, this important early work—Wharton's first attempt at longer fiction—has been receiving more scholarly attention, and much of the discussion has focused on the novella's grim realism, its unrelenting naturalism.[2] While Wharton certainly provides an unflinching look at the lives of single working women in nineteenth-century New York, what has not been explored in enough detail is how the realism of "Bunner Sisters" is fused with elements of romance, how the story's incorporation of fairy-tale structures and motifs contributes to its emotional intensity and compelling imaginative power.

2 Elizabeth Ammons has persuasively shown how Wharton's realism often combines with fairy tale elements, deepening the social criticism of her work, and allowing her to explore the psychosexual dimensions of her subject. Demonstrating how "*Ethan Frome* calls up the fairy tale 'Snow White'" while *The Reef's* meaning "derives from allusions [...] to 'Cinderella' and 'Sleeping Beauty,'" Ammons's readings of these texts are incisive and illuminating, but she dismisses "Bunner Sisters" and does not attend to this text's

striking use of fairy tale elements (79). She sees it as "confused," a story "crudely misandrous," and Herman Ramy as simply "a monster."[3] Yet "Bunner Sisters" is also a work where "fairy tale visions dominate," and even in this early work, "love as we have been taught to expect it [...] in our fairy tales with their eternally happy endings is Wharton's subject" (Ammons 57). "Bunner Sisters," I would suggest, is not a "confused" piece, but a rich text, not only for its early social criticism of the conditions of single working women's lives, but also for the exciting glimpse it offers into Wharton's technique, her combining of realism and elements of romance, an approach that will eventually culminate in her masterpiece *Ethan Frome.*

Sibling Devotion and "Snow White and Rose Red"

3 In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim, observes that fairy tales about siblings often "stand for seemingly incompatible aspects of the human personality," and "are among the oldest and most widely disseminated" (90). While the tales may vary in some respects, they all have a common plot whereby the siblings "usually separate after an original period of having been united and then have different fates" (Bettelheim 90). "When the adventurous brother perishes [...] because he has permitted himself to live in accordance with his desires or to disregard dangers and obstacles," Bettelheim writes, "his brother sets out to rescue him, succeeds and forever after the two live happily reunited" (91). "Bunner Sisters" follows much of this general structure as one sibling leaves home, is "exposed to terrible perils," and the other feels compelled to rescue her (Bettelheim 91). Wharton's tale also recalls a particular sibling fairy tale in which this plot is altered somewhat, a tale Bettelheim includes in the "animal bridegroom" category, the Grimm Brothers' "Snow White and Rose Red." In this tale, two sisters are devoted to each other and remain together as they encounter troubles and challenges. As the narrator remarks: "The two children were so fond of one another that they always held each other by the hand when they went out together, and when Snow White said, 'We will not leave each other,' Rose Red answered, 'Never so long as we live,' and their mother would add, 'What one has, she must share with the other'" (Grimm 502). When the two sisters are visited by a prince who has been turned into a bear by an evil dwarf, they *both* help the bear. Later in the story after the prince is freed from the dwarf's spell, Snow White marries the prince and Rose Red marries the prince's brother so that even after marriage, the sisters need not separate. Indeed, what is continually stressed in "Snow White and Rose Red" is the devotion, harmony and unity of the siblings.

4 Wharton sets up a similar scenario in "Bunner Sisters": two devoted sisters have always lived together peacefully, and are "content" with the "humble prosperity" of their shop (167). With its echo of "Once upon a time," Wharton's opening line of the story even recalls the language of fairy tales: "In the days when New York's traffic moved at the pace of the drooping horse car," she begins, "an inconspicuous shop [...] was intimately and favorably known to the feminine population of the quarter bordering on Stuyvesant Square" (166). As in "Snow White and Rose Red," the bonds between women and the strength of female community are highlighted in "Bunner Sisters": the world of the Bunner sisters is a "homosocial world" in which men make but a "shadowy appearance" (Smith-Rosenberg 9, 2). Campbell observes that this sheltered female world seems to come "straight out of local color fiction": "Surrounded by the small

supportive community of women who live in their neighborhood [...] the Bunner sisters contrive to make of their life together a thing perfect of its kind" (174, 176). Though they do not live in the idyllic pastoral world envisioned in "Snow White and Rose Red" and though their mother is absent, Wharton's sisters are similar to Grimm's in their commitment "to make of their life together a thing perfect of its kind."

5 The degree to which their lives are marked by a common destiny is also emphasized in Cynthia Griffin Wolff's observation that "The women are linked indistinguishably" in their shop's sign; "they share their simple meals and sleep together in the same big bed in which they were born: two pinched lives that might extend together unchanged into eternity" (67). Wolff believes that "the women have very little to distinguish between them" because Wharton was not able to create varied women characters early in her writing career (67). Wharton, however, does emphasize differences between the sisters, differences that echo the fairy tale structure described by Bettelheim, and it is these differences as well as their common destiny and their harmonious life together that align the Bunner sisters with Grimm's fairy tale sisters (67).

6 In Grimm's tale, we learn that Snow White is "more quiet and gentle than Rose Red," and that she "sat at home with her mother and helped with the housework" (Grimm 501). Like Snow White, Ann Eliza is the more quiet, the more domestic sister. She is the one who will work without complaint and repress her own needs and desires while Evelina is always "the first to yield to her feelings" (192). It is Ann Eliza who puts the kettle on the stove, and awaits the return of her younger sister who runs all the errands in their neighborhood (167). Though Ann Eliza is older than Evelina, she seems incapable of negotiating with the outside world. When Evelina is sick and Ann Eliza must go to the market for them, Evelina feels certain that the market vendors will "cheat" her older sister (174). Indeed it seems Ann Eliza's journeys outside the domestic realm are not only "intense," filling her with "subdued excitement," they are often harrowing (172). In the market, she confronts the "gory-aproned butcher" who "picked up his weapon with a grin" (175). Riding in the horse carts she is "wedged" between strangers as she feels the "persistence of an evil dream" (192). And in her visit to Tiffany's, she enters a nightmarish vision where "[w]hichever way she looked, clocks stretched away from her in glittering interminable vistas," and their "cackle [...] came to her like the yell of waves in a storm" (224, 226). Since Ann Eliza prefers the "monastic quiet of the shop," part of the drama of the story is that she is compelled to leave this protected domestic sphere, and, in following the structure Bettelheim observes in so many sibling fairy tales, this will culminate in her attempt to find the whereabouts of Evelina who she fears is in terrible trouble (442).

7 Evelina meanwhile resembles Rose Red who "liked better to run about in the meadows and fields looking for flowers and catching butterflies" (Grimm 501). During their outing to rural Hoboken, Evelina is described as "more restless" (198). In Mrs. Hochmuller's garden, Ann Eliza "thought of quiet afternoons in church, and of hymns her mother had sung to her when she was a baby" (198). Evelina, however, "wandered from the well to the summer house and back [...] tossed crumbs to the chickens and disturbed the cat with arch caresses, and at last [...] expressed a desire to go down into the wood," soon disappearing with Herman Ramy through the hole in the fence (198). Not only is Evelina the one who eagerly explores the world outside the home, she is also concerned with ornamentation; like Rose Red who "every morning [...] laid a wreath of flowers by her mother's bed before she awoke" (Grimm 502), she has a knack for

decoration, and beautifying things. Evelina, we learn, "pins a crimson bow under her collar," and "still permitted herself the frivolity of waving her pale hair" (187, 169). Clearly, like the fairy tale sisters, Ann Eliza and Evelina while living similar lives are opposite in temperament; however, the harmony and ease found in Snow White and Rose Red's placid world will prove impossible to maintain in Wharton's novella.

Sibling Rivalry and "Cinderella"

8 Once Herman Ramy enters the sisters' lives, the bonds between Ann Eliza and Evelina become strained and Wharton's story begins to take on the elements of "Cinderella," a fairy tale that reinforces passive femininity where women are rivals and men have ultimate power. Ann Eliza is now torn between her desire for marriage and her loyalty to Evelina; when she becomes jealous of the attention Ramy gives Evelina, she is startled by her "secret disloyalty" (187). As the focus of the sisters' lives shifts from maintaining their shop to entertaining a male suitor, the Bunner sisters' easy compatibility is complicated by bitterness and rivalry.

9 Indeed, one could argue that Ann Eliza is a kind of Cinderella figure. She is humble and self-effacing, gaining the readers' sympathies while the self-absorbed Evelina is "never actively alive to the emotional atmosphere about her" (205-206). Like Cinderella, Ann Eliza seems condemned to serve her selfish sister who always gets the first cup of tea and the largest slice of pie (170). She saves her money to buy the clock for Evelina's birthday, and by the story's end, she wears herself out trying to nurse Evelina back to health. Evelina, on the other hand, is a chronic complainer: "Ain't it hateful having to do everything in one room," she asks Ann Eliza who responds, "I always think if we ask for more what we have may be taken from us" (180, 181). Despite Evelina's whining, Ann Eliza serves her sister without complaint, and when Evelina is getting ready for an outing with Ramy, Ann Eliza "brought out her mosaic brooch," and "a cashmere scarf of their mother's was taken from its linen" (188). Ann Eliza, who expects nothing for herself, is like Cinderella adorning an undeserving stepsister for the ball. Like Cinderella's stepsisters, Evelina is also depicted as less sincere and more pretentious; when Ramy visits the sisters she speaks with "a high drawl she cultivated before strangers," and she lays his overcoat "on a chair with the gesture she imagined the lady with the puffed sleeves might make use of" (182). While we are continually shown Ann Eliza's emotional turmoil and pain, we only see Evelina's vanity and self-absorption such as when she smiles at her reflection in the cracked glass and declares: "My bonnet *is* becoming, isn't it?" (189). As Campbell aptly remarks, "Ann Eliza, like Ethan Frome is tied to an inferior partner" (79).

10 In "Cinderella" of course, the vain and self-absorbed sister would never win the prince. The humble hard-working and self-sacrificing sister does, and, in the same way, Wharton's Cinderella figure is desired by "the prince" too. In fact, Ramy eventually seeks out Ann Eliza and proposes. Although he has no slipper, he somehow recognizes the worthier mate: "I guess you're healthier than your sister, even if you're less sizeable," he decides (200). As Ramy's comment demonstrates, Wharton follows the fairy tale motif only so far. Indeed, his proposal refutes the possibility of a happy outcome as he continues with, "I always liked de quiet style—no fuss and airs and not afraid of work" (202). Speaking "as though dispassionately cataloguing her charms," Ramy's proposal reveals his true concerns: which sister will he get the most work out

of? Which sister will be easiest to dominate and order around? (202). While this proposal dramatically denies a "Cinderella" outcome to her story, Ann Eliza insists on viewing herself as a kind of Cinderella and Ramy as a kind of Prince Charming. Indeed part of the tragedy is the sisters' continual misreading of Ramy.[1] Sadly, Ann Eliza turns his practical no-nonsense, self-serving proposal into the "crucial moment of her life," the moment when the prince finally sees her true value (203). As the narrator observes, "She felt as though a visible glory lay on her," and "at last" she and Evelina were "equals" (204). Like Cinderella, Ann Eliza only seems to recognize her own worth when she is desired by a male suitor.

11 Unlike Cinderella, however, Ann Eliza rejects the offer of marriage and continues to serve her less worthy sister. Wharton's tale shows us the toll such self-abnegation takes on a woman's psyche. This Cinderella—while seemingly selfless—is struggling to repress her hostility and resentment. When Evelina visits Ramy, the narrator points out that Ann Eliza feels a "twinge of envy for the fate which gave Evelina every opportunity that came their way" (179). She also recalls with bitterness that Evelina "had the Sunday school teacher too" (179). Finally, Wharton questions the good that results from such self-denial, for while Cinderella's self-sacrifice eventually ends and she is rewarded, Ann Eliza will only come to learn "the inutility of self-sacrifice" (236).

Prince Charming or Animal Bridegroom?

12 Although the plot of "Bunner Sisters" revolves around the Cinderella motif of male rescue, the story also draws upon the imagery and motifs of the "animal bridegroom" fairy tale whereby the prince is placed under a spell, transformed into a beast and needs to be rescued, for while the sisters look to Ramy as their rescuing prince, at first they feel that he actually needs *their* help. In addition then to recalling the sibling relations in "Snow White and Rose Red," Wharton's novella also echoes this fairy tale's use of the animal bridegroom motif. As Bettelheim remarks of animal bridegroom tales, "it is the heroine's affection and devotion that transform the beast. Only if she comes to love him truly will he be disenchanted" (284). Bettelheim also notes that "these stories convey that it is mainly the female who needs to change her attitude about sex from rejecting to embracing it, because as long as sex appears to her as ugly and animal-like, it remains animalistic in the male, he is not disenchanted" (286). He goes on to explain how the animal bridegroom functions in an unusual way in "Snow White and Rose Red":

> While the animal groom is nearly always a disgusting or ferocious beast, in a few stories, it is a tame animal, despite its savage nature. This is true in the Brothers Grimm's "Snow White and Rose Red." But these bestial qualities are not absent from the story—they are represented by an uncouth dwarf who has bewitched the prince into a bear [...] the girls have to rescue the dwarf three times before the bear can kill it and become disenchanted. So while the animal groom is friendly and tame, the females still have to exorcise its nasty nature in the form of the dwarf for an animal-like relation to become a human one. (285-86)

13 Evoking Grimm's dwarf who has an "ash gray face," and "glared at the girls with fiery red eyes" (Grimm 506, 504), Herman Ramy is "a shortish man with a pale bearded face," and "prominent eyes" (181-82). He is certainly a man under a spell—the spell of opium —and his "nasty nature" rather than being "exorcised" only expands as the sisters, powerless to "disenchant" him, entrust their lives to his keeping. By the story's end,

Ramy's beast-like qualities intensify; his treatment of Evelina is so inhumane that we are left with no hope that the "animal-like relation" between a man and a woman might become a "human one."

14 There are also key moments when Wharton's novella and Grimm's fairy tale seem to mirror each other in their use of incident and imagery. In Grimm's tale, Snow White and Rose Red are terrified of a bear that arrives at their door on a cold winter's night, but the bear is kind and assures them: "Do not be afraid, I will do you no harm. I am half-frozen and only want to warm myself a little beside you" (Grimm 503). Like the fairy-tale sisters, the Bunner sisters are also disturbed by an unexpected male arrival. The knock of Ramy on a "very cold night" makes Ann Eliza anxious and nervous as the baby's petticoat she is holding "shook in her fingers" (181). Like the bear, Ramy "knew what hard times was," and he evokes sympathy and compassion from both sisters who listen "to the story of his early struggles in Germany and of the long illness which had been the cause of his recent misfortunes" (188). Both Grimm's bear and Wharton's Ramy are drawn to the sisters' homes and domestic comforts. The bear soon "came every evening at the same time, lay down by the hearth and let the children tease him as much as they pleased" (Grimm 503). It is not long before he "stretched out by the fire and rumbled contentedly" (Grimm 503). Not only does the bear become comfortable, the sisters are no longer afraid of the bear: "They tugged his hair with their hands, put their feet upon his back and rolled him about or they took a hazel switch and beat him, and when he growled, they laughed [...]. When they were too rough he called out, 'Leave me alive children. Snow White, Rose Red, will you beat your suitor till he's dead?'" (503). Grimm's sisters are confident and capable—these are not girls that need to be rescued. Indeed, they even seem to exert power over their male guest.

15 Mirroring the events in Grimm's tale, Ramy also visits the sisters with "increasing frequency," and as "he grew more intimate [...] he began to permit himself long stretches of meditative silence that were not without charm to his hostesses" (188). Yet the sisters' comfort and familiarity with this male figure is distinctly different from that displayed by Snow White and Rose Red: "There was something at once fortifying and pacific in the sense of that tranquil male presence in an atmosphere which had so long quivered with little feminine doubts and distresses, and the sisters fell into the habit of saying to each other in moments of uncertainty: 'We'll ask Mr. Ramy when he comes,' and of accepting his verdict whatever it might be with a fatalistic readiness that relieved them of all responsibility" (188). Unlike Snow White and Rose Red who maintain control over their hearth and home, the Bunner sisters play a traditional feminine role and their confidence in themselves and their initial desire to rescue this man turns to insecurity, passivity and fear. Before too long, they even entrust Ramy with their financial security; the narrator informs us that "after long hours of midnight counsel they had decided to advise with Mr. Ramy where to invest their money" (193). Rather than rescuing the "animal bridegroom," rather than believing in their own strength, the sisters, like the sisters in *Cinderella,* desire to *be* rescued and have their status enhanced through marriage. Despite the differences in the sisters' sensibilities, both Grimm's tale and Wharton's story highlight the inevitability of the marriage plot. Grimm's sisters eventually marry and live happily ever after with the prince and the prince's brother, and Wharton, while refuting the possibility of disenchanting the "animal bridegroom," nevertheless has Evelina Bunner make a disastrous marriage with Ramy.

16 Indeed, while Snow White and Rose Red soon recognize the pure heart of the bear, the prince beneath the animal exterior, Ann Eliza and Evelina Bunner fail to see the dark designs of Ramy, the beast within the lonely bachelor. In addition to mirroring the bear's actions in "Snow White and Rose Red," Ramy recalls the "animal bridegroom" of fairy tales in other ways. As Marina Warner emphasizes, "the animal bridegroom may appear in various guises, but is always repulsive" (279). With his "yellowish teeth," "sunken cheeks," "wide skull thinly covered with grayish hair," and "knotty joint square finger tips rimmed with grime," Ramy is—without a doubt— a repulsive figure (182). There is also an odd animal image that appears in reference to Ramy in the text. When Ann Eliza leaves his shop, her "eyes were fixed on a dusty bronze clock in the window [...] and she remembered that it represented a Newfoundland dog with his paw on an open book" (194). Later at Tiffany's when she learns the truth of why Ramy was "sitting in abject dejection behind his counter," she "saw again [...] the green bronze clock in the window representing a Newfoundland dog with his paw on a book" (226). This image of a dog pawing a book is telling: it functions as a subtle symbol of Ramy and emphasizes the inability of the sisters to understand him. Although Ramy quotes Longfellow and seems to have a reverence for culture, he is motivated by baser animal instincts as his treatment of Evelina after their marriage shows. He is in reality a cruel, selfish, immoral man who only *appears* to be cultured, genteel and decent.[1] For the Bunner sisters, there is no prince hiding beneath the surface. As Maria Tatar writes: "In many tales of animal grooms, neither an act of love nor a deed of violence suffices to reverse the spell cast on a prince by a wicked witch or evil fairy" (175). Wharton's story, while echoing at times "Snow White and Rose Red," taps into the darker versions of the animal bridegroom tale.

17 So Ramy is no prince charming, and his selfishness and inability to love align him instead with another fairy tale character: the dwarf. In his analysis of the roles of dwarfs, Bettelheim comments that "[d]warfs are eminently male, but males who are stunted in their development. These little men with their stunted bodies and their mining occupation—they skillfully penetrate into dark holes—all suggest phallic connotations. They are certainly not men in any sexual sense—their way of life, their interest in material goods to the exclusion of love, suggest a pre-oedipal existence" (210). Like the dwarf of many a fairy tale, Ramy is "stunted" in his development. He is not looking for a loving relationship, but only for someone who will support his drug habit. Though he fathers a child, he has no feelings of love towards it and no desire to raise it. When he discovers Evelina is pregnant, he gets "mad," and after the baby is born and Evelina is ill in the hospital, Ramy abandons them, running away with Mrs. Hochmuller's daughter, and taking all of Mrs. Hochmuller's money (234). Ramy—the man both sisters looked to with longing, relief and wonder—turns out to be "a drug fiend," and no amount of feminine devotion can break the spell cast by opium (228). Evelina will eventually die from her traumatic experience, leaving Ann Eliza alone and destitute.

Awakening and Integration

18 N. J. Girardot believes that fairy tales "reflect the struggle for maturity and enlightenment," and that fairy tale heroes and heroines "seek an *awakening* rather than a mate" (qtd. in Stone 395). As Warner puts it, "the idea of awakening [...] goes to the

heart of fairy tale's function" (417). As mentioned earlier, the two figures in sibling tales "symbolize opposite aspects of our nature, compelling us to act in contrary ways": "the striving for independence and self assertion, and the opposite tendency to remain safely home, tied to the parents" (Bettelheim 91). "Both desires reside in each of us," Bettelheim writes, and "we cannot survive deprived of either" (91). These tales teach, therefore, that "entirely cutting oneself off from one's past leads to disaster, but that to exist only beholden to the past is stunting [...] while it is safe, it provides no life of one's own. Only the thorough *integration* of these contrary tendencies permits a successful existence" (Bettelheim 91, emphasis added). Echoing the plots of sibling fairy tales recounted by Bettelheim, Ann Eliza must somehow integrate those "contrary tendencies" of remaining "safely home" and "striving for independence"; she must reconcile her past life with her sister with a new life of her own, and on this level, one could argue that Wharton's tale of integration succeeds even if the fairy tale of romantic love fails. Rather than moving towards darkness and despair then, "Bunner Sisters" might also be read as a story that moves towards "integration," for there are subtle shifts that take place within Ann Eliza as the story progresses, and the ending is more ambiguous than most critics have been willing to acknowledge.[1]

19 "Bunner Sisters" is also a story of an arduous journey that results in awakening and integration. Ann Eliza who did not like to venture outside the "monastic quiet of the shop" eventually displays courage, endurance and growth, for by the end of the story she has made several difficult journeys alone to discover her sister's whereabouts. Her journey to Hoboken is especially trying as "everything about her seemed unfamiliar and forbidding"; when she reaches Mrs. Hochmuller's house with her heart "beating violently," she finds that the flower borders are "blackened," the window panes are "cracked and dirty," and the irate washer woman slams the door in her face (219, 220). After she leaves this "desolate scene, the icy wind piercing her thin dress like gauze," she becomes feverishly ill, and is so helpless that her neighbors must care for her (221).

20 In the midst of recovering from this difficult journey, she continues her search, intent on discovering what has happened to Evelina. She next ventures to Tiffany's, Ramy's former employer, feeling "weak and unsteady" (224). It is an agonizing trip for the shy and feeble Ann Eliza as she "felt herself the centre of innumerable eyes" when she "moved forward between long lines of show cases" (224). Although she feels flustered and uncomfortable, she manages—in a scene of surreal anxiety—to pass through "a great hall full of the buzzing and booming of thousands of clocks," to meet Mr. Loomis who reveals the bitter truth about Ramy's drug addiction (224). This journey, while physically and emotionally devastating, leads her closer to the truth, and her courage and commitment to her sister elicits admiration from her neighbors; however, as time passes she "was conscious that Mrs. Hawkins and Miss Mellins were watching her with affectionate anxiety but the knowledge brought no comfort. She no longer cared what they felt or thought about her. Her grief lay far beyond touch of human healing and after a while she became aware that they knew they could not help her" (228). This passage emphasizes Ann Eliza's growing awareness, her realization that the burden of knowledge brings no comfort. Along with this increasing awareness though we see her increased strength and endurance. While at first she is "too small a person to harbor so great a guest" as solitude, and although she lies ill for a while, "little by little she grows used to being alone," and just before Evelina's return she "was insensibly beginning to take up the healing routine of life" (229).

21 As Jennifer Fleissner observes, we do see in Ann Eliza "a capacity for renewal," and by the novella's end "the shop's routine is not deadening but in comparison to a 'fatal' marriage 'peaceful'" (543, 539). Moreover, amidst all the emotional turmoil of Evelina's return, Ann Eliza displays a stoic endurance and practicality as she realizes there is "little time to brood" and is "surprised at the strength and steadiness of her voice" (236). Here we truly see a different character from the timid women who was overwhelmed with visiting the market and walking the city streets. Also, instead of adhering to a rigid set of conventions, she now questions "inherited principles"; for the first time she realizes that a lie may be the more humane action when she decides to keep the truth from Miss Mellins to protect Evelina, and wrestling with her earlier belief that "decent people do not borrow," she becomes more flexible and begins to think for herself: "But nowadays she no longer believed in the personal supervision of Providence and had she been compelled to steal the money instead of borrowing it, she would have felt that *her conscience was the only tribunal* before which she had to answer" (236, 237, emphasis added). Ann Eliza is now moving towards greater knowledge and self-awareness even if that knowledge is painful and terrifying. She keeps insisting to the doctor: "I want to know" (238). This seems to result in a bigger heart as well, for she is less judgmental, more understanding. When Evelina admits she is "disheartened," Ann Eliza "accepts it in silence" rather than meeting Evelina's confession with "a word of pious admonition as she would in the past" (237). We sense Ann Eliza's growth, her humanity, her willingness to stare life in the face, rather than run from its horrors; we see her recognition that the old pieties may not work, and that there is not always an easy answer. As Fleissner puts it, Ann Eliza becomes a "doubting modern subject" (531).

22 While Wolff has astutely observed that "Bunner Sisters" is intimately tied to Wharton's own emotional struggles, she sees this as the novella's flaw; I would suggest that this is what makes the novella so compelling. It is a story that, while dark and grim, shows solitary strength and purpose, and taps into deep fairy-tale structures that perhaps evoke Wharton's own feelings during one of the darkest decades of her life: her realization of her solitude, the loneliness and disappointment of her marriage, and finally her movement towards awakening and integration. Like Ann Eliza, Wharton was no longer young, but she was becoming stronger and wiser; she was moving out of a time of illness and physical weakness to make her own way in the world.

23 Ann Eliza's setting out at the novella's end might suggest a move towards a kind of integration as the ending provides a sense of distance from the past, but also a sense of valuing that past. The little shop she visits appeals to her because it "was about the size of the one on which Ann Eliza had just closed the door, and it looked as fresh and gay and thriving as she and Evelina had once dreamed of making" (245). When the shop girl tells Ann Eliza, "We want a bright girl, someone stylish [...] not over thirty anyhow and nice looking," we realize that what Ann Eliza valued in her former shop—its welcoming atmosphere, its fostering of a female community—is not necessarily valued in this new world that privileges style and image (246). Still, we may also sense that within Ann Eliza's stunned and confused response to the shop girl is her refusal of the values embodied by this new shop. Ann Eliza may not be able to find a shop that integrates the values of the past with her hopes for a brighter future but her determination and her hard-won knowledge are very real.

24 Indeed, Wharton's story of Ann Eliza's "awakening" highlights the dark undercurrent in many versions of the animal bridegroom and Cinderella fairy tales, for grooms are not always disenchanted and Cinderella figures are "subjected to all manner of abuse and humiliations" (Tatar 182). As Tatar emphasizes: "the hard facts of fairy-tale life offer exaggerated visions of the grimmer realities and fantasies that touch and shape the lives of every child and adult" (192). While Wharton gives us perhaps an "exaggerated vision of the grimmer realities," at the end of "Bunner Sisters," there is also, as Hermione Lee said of Wharton herself in the 1890s, a stronger and more admirable woman here "making the best of what happened to her" (77). Wharton's final lines remind us that ultimately "Bunner Sisters" is a story about survival: "The great city under the fair spring sky seemed to throb with the stir of innumerable beginnings. She walked on, looking for another shop window with a sign in it" (246). Both Ann Eliza Bunner and Edith Wharton do go on. And while Ann Eliza's awakening may be met with limited opportunities in this new modern city, Edith Wharton would transcend the emotional deprivation of her life. "Bunner Sisters" even in its dark uncertain ending nevertheless points to Edith Wharton at the start of a remarkable career.

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NOTES

1. R.W.B. Lewis writes that Wharton's editor at Scribner's, Edward Burlingame, was "warily complimentary": "I like and admire much of it quite unreservedly," Burlingame wrote to Wharton, "but the motif and the admirable detail and color of the story fail to carry its great length." Burlingame decided he could not accept it since "it was too long to print in a single issue and it would be fatal to divide it." See *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, p. 66.

2. Donna Campbell believes that "Bunner Sisters" is Wharton's most "overt exploration of naturalism and local color fiction" (80). Jay Martin decides that along with *Summer* and *Ethan Frome*, it is one of her chief works of naturalism. Shari Benstock, meanwhile, praises the realism of the novella, observing how Wharton "recreates the reality of these women's lives with subtle accuracy" (70). Linda Kornasky sees the novella as an "investigation into how the disintegration of female lives can be represented in naturalist fiction"(47). Most recently, Jennifer Fleissner has observed that "Bunner Sisters" might interrogate naturalistic conventions and be, "a countervision to the dehumanizing effects of the mechanical timepiece" (540). She argues that rather than hopelessness, the story may offer an alternative possibility for women since "the most rigorously clock-timed work might actually offer a certain freedom not available when the only compulsion was nature's own" (543).

3. While the text is highly critical of traditional gender roles, "misandrous" seems too extreme a charge for "Bunner Sisters." There are likeable men in the novella such as Mr Loomis, Mr. Hawkins and the man who finds Evelina begging on the streets and puts her on a train bound for New York.

1. Barbara Hochman argues that "the seductive appeal of 'culture' for the Bunner sisters [...] is especially important. The fatal attraction of Mr. Ramy [...] is much enhanced by their perception of him as an 'educated man'"(128). "Bunner Sisters," she insists, stresses the danger of "assuming that a literate person is necessarily a virtuous one" (130).

1. See again Barbara Hochman's analysis of the sisters' misreading of Ramy in "The Good, the Bad and the Literary: Edith Wharton's 'Bunner Sisters' and the Social Contexts of Reading."

1. Fleissner's interpretation is more positive and takes into consideration the ambiguity of the ending. She writes: "Perhaps 'Bunner Sisters' might better be considered alongside *Sister Carrie*, for their endings leave us similarly *in medias res.* Carrie's movement back and forth in her rocking chair, in a motion again akin to the clock's empty endless ticking, has seemed to many no different from a Lily-like 'plot of decline.' Yet why should this be? Carrie has not attained perfect happiness, certainly, but the point of her story seems closer to 'Bunner Sisters' in its recognition that the stories thought to promise such a conclusion—the plot of marriage, the rescue by a protective man—turn out to be less palatable than remaining on one's own" (542). Fleissner adds that, "Despite a standard critical tendency to see naturalism's heroines as poverty-stricken, the class position of working women like Carrie, Trina McTeague and Ann Eliza [...] is at the least ambiguous, too new yet to be slotted simply under existing alternatives" (542).

ABSTRACTS

Alors que la plupart des analyses critiques de « Bunner Sisters » insistent sur le réalisme sombre de cette nouvelle, je m'intéresse ici à la reprise des motifs et des structures du conte de fées. En m'appuyant sur les travaux de Bruno Bettelheim, je montre que les relations entre les sœurs et le personnage du prince charmant reprennent des motifs de « Cendrillon » et de « Blanche neige ». Cette approche met en évidence le mélange de réalisme et de merveilleux. En racontant l'échec du mariage, et en montrant l'existence d'une autre possibilité, peut-être plus intéressante, Wharton finit par refuser le conte de fées sentimental et par faire le récit d'une « intégration ». Finalement, l'itinéraire sentimental d'Ann Eliza Bunner est très proche de celui de Wharton : c'est ce qui fait l'importance de cette nouvelle, qui permet de mieux comprendre les sentiments de la femme et le style de l'écrivain.

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